

How Did Christianity Begin?

James Crossley on Earliest Christianity

James Crossley's final contribution to the debate finds him arguing, unsurprisingly, that the origins of Christianity can be explained solely on the basis of historically determined evidence. So he examines monotheism and empire (both the Persian and the Roman in due course); the meaning of monotheism; and pagan monotheism. And in the midst of his description of monotheism in the Persian empire he observes that it '... is not only one logical outworking of the universalism of the Persian variety but also a pragmatic measure with such a vast empire' (p. 144) or, if I have understood him aright, monotheism was bound to happen because the Persians were headed in that direction anyway and then the Jews and the Christians hopped on board. Mind you, this is a rather crude summation of Crossley's finesse infested argument, but I don't think it inaccurate. But the Persians weren't the only ones who gathered gods and lumped them together. 'Assimilating local gods to one great god is something found in the Graeco-Roman world' (p. 146). And who can argue with any of that?

So where did Christianity get it's own brand of monotheism, which allowed it to worship the Father along with the Son? 'The shift away from physical kinship in earliest Christianity, tied in with a willingness to associate with 'gentile sinners' and shifts in Law-observance, opened the way for Christians to exploit the existing wide-ranging Jewish networks and spread monotheistic religion' (p. 147).

Curiously, though Crossley seems to ignore the centuries of persecution between the Church's birth and its becoming capable of 'exploiting the existing wide-ranging Jewish networks and spread[ing] monotheistic religion'. The leap from Jesus to Paul to Gospels to Roman religion of favor is something of a compression. How, then, do the centuries of illegality which the Church experienced fit into Crossley's scheme?

'... The broader monotheistic tendencies in the ancient world could again have contributed to a situation where new and distinctive ways of developing monotheism were being created' (p. 148) all sounds very well except for the simple fact that this neatly composed portrait overlooks the messy gladiator contests which featured Christians consumed and destroyed. If the Roman world was so entranced by developing monotheisms, why the hostility?

Crossley continues by noting correctly that 'There was a final pagan flourish [sic!] at the highest level when Julian became Roman emperor, renounced his Christian past and attempted to turn the Christian tide' (p. 150). 'But unfortunately for Julian and all his intellectual labours, the Christian god was to win out and be the god of the empire' (p. 151).

[A brief interlude in our proceedings - A bitter and angry ex-christian seeking to undermine the faith he once held... it sounds very contemporary, doesn't it? Fortunately, though, from my point of view, Christianity's modern bitter, hostile, and angry ex-lovers have no greater chance of destroying it than Julian did. Hector Avalos and his ilk may wish to take note of that little historical factoid.]

Crossley concludes, 'But making Jesus more-or-less the god of Rome would arguably be the most important factor in Christianity becoming a world religion to this day' (p. 152). This is true, of course, but it is only partially true. For while Crossley argues well, incisively, intelligently, and nearly persuasively, his rejection of any supernatural cause *a priori* limits his ability to objectivity. In other words, his attempt to explain Christian origins from a purely historical point of view is a cul-de-sac because it eventually leads nowhere. Only when one takes into account at least the possibility of divine intervention in human history can one fully appreciate how the Church came to be. Failing that, one simply views half of the story. And, as we all know, ending a story before the punchline never leaves any hearer completely satisfied.